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MORAL OBJECTIVITY

By Nicholas Rescher

I. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to set out an argument for moral objectivity. A brief sketch of the considerations at issue should help make it possible to keep sight of the forest amid the profusion of trees. Overall, then, the line of thought that is being set out here runs as follows:

- To validate moral objectivity, it must be shown that an impersonal matter of fact (rather than a personal opinion or feeling) is at issue.
- A key step in this direction emerges from the consideration that morality is a functional enterprise whose aim is to channel people's actions toward realizing the best interests of everyone.
- This makes morality into something quite different from mere mores geared toward communal uniformity and predictability. (After all, morality is not a matter of anthropology; it addresses what people *should* do rather than what they *actually* do.)
- The inherent generality of moral principles means that they operate at a level of universality that transcends the limits of societal variation.
- This circumstance militates decisively against moral relativism.
- Nevertheless, general moral principles can (and should) lend some degree of support to the characteristic (and potentially idiosyncratic) claims of our own community.
- In consequence, morality is rooted in the very nature of rationality and thereby provides the moral enterprise with an objectively cogent rationale.

So much for the general line of argument. I will first take up the issue of moral relativism, since it is such a pervasively held position.

II. Moral Relativism

There are two distinct modes of moral relativism. Both agree that all moral codes are of equal validity—that each code is as good as any other. However, one mode, "indifferentist relativism," sees all codes as equally *valid,* and the other, "nihilism," sees all as equally *invalid.* The former,

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syncretist approach takes the line of an indiscriminate openness and acceptance; the latter, nihilistic approach takes the line of a total rejection. Either way, the prospect of a *reasoned* endorsement of one moral position over others is excluded.

Both doctrines are deeply problematic, however. On the one hand, indifferentist relativism is caught up in the evident implausibility of holding that any moral code, any set of moral rules whatsoever, is as good as any other for us here and now, in the circumstances in which we actually find ourselves in our interactions with others. Moral nihilism, on the other hand, is caught up in the no less striking implausibility of the contention that no moral code whatsoever is valid, that no code can make a warranted claim to effectiveness in safeguarding the interests of people. Both forms of relativism are deeply enmeshed in difficulties, but the former version represents the more common threat of a subjectivist relativism that maintains: "To each his own; such differences as there are between moral codes merely lie in the mind of the exponent." On such a subjectivist view, morality is a matter of attitudes or tastes: we have ours, and they have theirs, period. In effect, there simply is no *fact of the matter* about a moral thesis such as "Stealing is wrong." The subjectivist insists: "That's just what people happen to think in our set or our society." On this view, the sole reason why moral judgments ultimately matter for us is one of "keeping in step" with the rest of our group so as to conform our behavior to socially accepted norms. Any code of conduct is as good as any other: it is simply a matter of "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." All moralities are created equal.

From such a standpoint, there is no place for moral objectivity. Thus, there nowadays prevails a widespread but nevertheless unfortunate tendency to deny the possibility of rational controversy about moral matters, to relegate morality to the never-never land of matters of taste, feeling, or otherwise discursively insupportable opinion.

While such a line of thought has been envisioned by philosophers since the ancient skeptics, it is nowadays commonplace.[1] To take a single example, Charles L. Stevenson's "attitudinal expression" theory is an influential representative of the general approach.[2] Stevenson holds that a moral evaluation merely characterizes the *subject* and not the *object* that is at issue. My contention that "You acted wrongly in stealing that money" is, Stevenson holds, a mere compound of two assertions, one a factual contention ("You stole that money") and the other a personal avowal ("I

[1] The classic exponent of the position is David Hume. See Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1738), and Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (London, 1752), Appendix 1, sec. 1. Antecedents can be found in the compendia of skeptical views assembled by Sextus Empiricus.

[2] See Charles L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," in his *Facts and Values* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), and also his earlier *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944). Two works particularly useful on the "emotive theory" are G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1967), and J. O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).

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disapprove of your doing this and urge you not to do similar things in the future"). The former component makes an objective, descriptive claim; the latter expresses the asserter's attitude toward it. The point of making moral contentions, Stevenson insists, "is not to indicate facts but to *create an influence.* Instead of merely describing people's interests [moral contentions endeavor to] *change* or *intensify* them. They recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists."[3] Moral claims are primarily designed to exhort people to channel their actions into generally beneficial modes.

Such an approach denies that actions are ever actually wrong in themselves, but insists that people merely *think* they are. Moral language is only "used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them."[4] Alternatively, moral judgments are only prescriptions—oblique injunctions designed to incite others to action.[5] In any event, they do not really express *evaluations* which, as such, are right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. Rather, they reflect the circumstance that people only *attach* or *attribute* value to human actions, ascriptions which are always made on an entirely subjective basis reflecting the makers' feelings, wishes, or attitudes—always without any real foundation or warrant in the nature of the object. There is nothing more to moral praise or condemnation than personal feeling. Rightness or wrongness simply lies in the view of the individual (or the group) as a mere expression of personal (or social) disapproval.

Notwithstanding its widespread endorsement, such a position is deeply problematic. Let us consider why.

III. Morality in Functional Perspective

The key to moral objectivity lies in the very nature of the moral enterprise. For the reality of it is that morality is a functional enterprise that exists for the sake of an end and purpose: to foster modes of action and interaction that facilitate the realization of human interests and, in particular, that channel people's actions in ways that make people's lives within their communities more beneficial and pleasant.

Accordingly, a moral system is instituted within the human community to guide behavior in ways that are beneficial to the best interests of the community collectively and its members distributively, that is, to make people's lives more satisfactory and fulfilling. The pivotal question, then, is this: Will a purportedly ethical mode of behavior, if systematically adopted, enhance the satisfaction of life and lessen its burdens and negativities? Does it, or would it, make people healthier, happier, more successful in the realization of those things that make life fuller and more

[3] Stevenson, *Facts and Values,* 16.
[4] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic,* reprint ed. (New York: Dover, 1952), 108.
[5] Compare R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

satisfying and rewarding? Does it, or would it, facilitate the realization of people's best interests?

The functional nature of morality—its being geared to serving the interests of people—makes for a "moral realism" which maintains that there are indeed moral facts.[6] It does not, however, underwrite that mode of "realism" which maintains that moral rightness is a certain sort of *property* of acts (be it a "nonnatural" property, or a "supervenient" property, or the sort of preternatural property discernible only by some special power of moral intuition).[7] Rather, the functional approach indicates that what is at issue with "rightness" is not a "property" in the ordinary sense at all, but a contextual feature of a *relational* sort which turns on the place of the act in question within a wider framework of relevant circumstances. Being "(morally) right," like being "average" in size or "inexpensive" in price, is a contextual feature relating to the setting of one item within its embracing environment. While it is not a property of an isolated item, such a feature is nevertheless one whose possession is objectively discernible, albeit only within the setting of that larger context. Thus, the moral status of an act is not the sort of thing that is a property or quality at all, but a relational feature whose determination involves a wide variety of contextual issues: agents, circumstances, motives, alternatives, and the like.

Subjectivist relativism stands committed to the idea that morality is simply a matter of local convention. It loses sight of what is really at issue with morality—the proper consideration of people's real interests. And thereby it makes a travesty of morality by restricting the idea of what people ought to do to what the particular customs of their society require. It confuses morality with mores. Mores are, indeed, simply matters of custom and convention, like table manners and dress codes; but morality involves the adaptation to local conditions of universal principles regarding the safeguarding of people's interests. A crucial divide thus separates morality from mores; a difference in kind is at issue. After all, moral choice is a matter of opting not for what people may happen to prefer but for what is (morally) preferable—or what can reasonably be claimed to be so with a view to the determinative aim of the whole enterprise, namely, the safeguarding of the real interests of people in general. This *normative* dimension means that the variability involved in the variation of moral rules from one society to another is a mere surface phenomenon that does not reach down to the level of fundamentals.

[6] A comprehensive bibliography of the subject is given in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Moral Realism Bibliography," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, Supplement (1986), 143–59.

[7] Critics of moral realism often suppose, quite wrongly, that ethical appraisals can reflect matters of fact only if ethical characteristics represent supernatural properties that are somehow discernible by a special faculty of moral intuition—a peculiar "moral sense," as it were. Only recently has this far-fetched view attracted the criticism it deserves. See Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism,* ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), as well as some of the other essays of that anthology.

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IV. Uniformity Despite Diversity: Morality Versus Mores

A critic might object at this point that moral objectivity is surely counterindicated by the circumstance that one cannot validly criticize the moral code of a society by any "external" criteria. But this is by no means true. *Whether* a certain operational code is intended within the ambit of its social context to operate as a moral code may well be a proper subject of discussion and controversy. Nonetheless, once it is settled that it is indeed a *moral* code that is at issue, then in view of that very fact one can certainly bring principles of critical evaluation to bear. For at this point the question becomes paramount whether, and how effectively, this code accomplishes for its society that function for which moral codes are instituted among men—to constrain their interactions in ways that safeguard their best interests.

When we are assessing a moral code in this way, we are *not* simply exercising a cultural imperialism by judging it against our own code; we are not asking how concordant or discordant it is with the prevailing mores-correlative standards of our society. We are judging it, rather, against those universal and absolute standards in terms of which the adequacy of any code, our own included, must be appraised. The evaluation of appropriateness is not one of our code against theirs, but one of judging *both* ours and theirs by a common, generic standard. What makes an action right or wrong (as the case may be) is just whether doing the sort of thing at issue protects or injures the interests of all the agents concerned. (To reemphasize: morality is by definition geared to the benefit of rational agents, even as refrigeration is by definition geared to cooling.)[8] This is part and parcel of the very meaning of "morally right" and "morally wrong," and it renders judgment in these matters factual, objective, and rationally disputable.

Morality, again, is a particular, well-defined sort of purposive project whose cohesive unity as such resides in its inherent function of molding the behavior of people in line with a care for one another's interests. Despite the diversity of the substantive moral codes of different societies, the basic overarching principles of morality are uniform and invariant; they are inherent in the very idea of what morality is all about.

The long and short of it is that the anthropological reduction of morality to mores just does not work. Some things are wrong in an absolute and universal way: murder (i.e., unjustifiably killing another person); taking improper advantage of people; inflicting pointless harm; lying and deception for selfish advantage; betraying a trust for personal gain; breaking promises out of sheer perversity; and misusing the institutions of one's society for one's own purposes. Local custom to the contrary notwith-

[8] Does this way of viewing the matter put subrational animals outside the pale of moral concern? By no means. For it matters deeply to rational agents how other rational agents treat animals, or for that matter, how they treat any other sorts of beings that have interests capable of being injured. We have a substantial interest in how others comport themselves who also belong to the type to which we see ourselves as belonging.

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standing, such things are morally wrong anytime, anywhere, and for anyone. Their prohibitions are moral universals—parts of morality as such. (Thus, these prohibitions hold good not just for us humans but for all rational beings.)

To be sure, different societies operate with different moral ground-rules at the procedural level. Some societies deem it outrageous for women to expose their faces, their breasts, their knees; others view this as altogether acceptable and perhaps even mandatory. Nonetheless, behind this variation stands a universal principle: "Respect people's sensibilities about the appropriate and acceptable appearance of fellow humans by conforming to established rules of proper modesty." This overarching principle is universal and absolute. Its implementation with respect to, say, elbows or belly buttons is, of course, something that varies with custom and the practices of the community. The rule itself is abstract and schematic; it stands in need of implementing criteria as to what proper modesty and due decorum demand. The matter is one of a universal principle with variable implementations subject to locally established standards and criteria that are grounded in the particular customs of the community.

Thus, while the concrete strictures of morality—its specific ordinances and procedural rules of thumb—will, of course, differ from age to age and culture to culture, nevertheless the ultimate principles that serve to define the project of "morality" as such are universal. The uniform governing conception of "what morality is" suffices to establish and standardize those ultimate and fixed principles that govern the moral enterprise as such. At the level of fundamentals, the variability of moral codes is underpinned by an absolute uniformity of moral principles and values. At this highest level alone is there absoluteness: the rejection of appropriate moral contentions at this level involves a lapse of rational cogency. But at the lower levels there is almost always some room for variation, and dispute as well. (How concern for the well-being of one's fellows can be brought to effective expression, for example, will very much depend on the institutions of one's society, and also, to some extent, on one's place within it.)

To be sure, anthropologists, and even, alas, philosophers, often say things like, "Members of the Wazonga tribe deem it morally proper (or even mandatory) to sacrifice first-born female children to the tribal gods." But there are big problems here. This way of talking betokens lamentably loose thinking. Compare:

(i) The Wazonga habitually (customarily) sacrifice first-born female children.
(ii) The Wazonga think it acceptable (or perhaps even meritorious) to sacrifice first-born female children.
(iii) The Wazonga think it *morally* acceptable (or mandatory) to sacrifice first-born female children.

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It must be noted that, however true and incontestable the first two contentions may be, the third is just untenable. For compare (iii) with:

(iv) The Wazonga think it *mathematically* true that dogs have tails.

No matter how firmly convinced the Wazonga may be that dogs have tails, thesis (iv)—taken as it stands, with its overt reference to *mathematical* truth—is firmly and squarely a thesis of *ours,* and *not* one of *theirs!* That "mathematically" is clearly something that we ourselves have interjected into the picture. For this very reason, it is in deep difficulty unless the condition is realized—as in the circumstances seems highly implausible—that the Wazonga have an essentially correct conception of what mathematics is, and, moreover, are convinced that the claim that dogs have tails belongs among the appropriate contentions of this particular realm. Analogously, one cannot appropriately maintain thesis (iii) unless one is prepared to claim both that the Wazonga have an essentially correct conception of what morality is (correct, that is, by the defining standards of morality), and furthermore that they are convinced that the practice in question is acceptable within the framework of this (moral) project as so conceived. The concatenation of these two conditions is not only implausible in the circumstances, but even paradoxical, seeing that the first condition powerfully counterindicates the second. The salient point is that the mere fact of seeing this practice as mandated by custom (as part of "what is expected of us and what we have always done") does *not* make it part of the Wazonga's *morality.*

The anthropological route to moral relativism is, to say the least, eminently problematic. For only a *rationale* that is conjointly articulated in terms of the definitive *telos* of the moral enterprise can render a customary practice—however compulsory—into a moral one. There is no difficulty whatever about the idea of different social *customs,* but the idea of different *moralities* faces insuperable difficulties. The case is much like that of saying that the tribe whose counting practices are based on the sequence "one, two, many" has a different arithmetic from ourselves. To do anything like justice to the facts, one would have to say that they do not have *arithmetic* at all, but just a peculiar, and very rudimentary, way of counting.[9] The situation of those exotic tribesmen of ours is similar. On the given evidence, they do not have a *different* morality; rather, their culture just has not developed to a point where they have a *morality* at all. If they think it is acceptable to engage in practices like the sacrifice of first-born girl children, then their grasp on the conception of morality is,

[9] The earliest Mesopotamian counting notation was a matter of context-variable numerical indicators, with one symbol indicating "10" when sheep were at issue, "6" when referring to containers of grain, and "18" when referring to fields or plots of arable land. Whatever these symbols were, they were not *numbers,* and such combinational manipulations as they admitted of do not constitute *arithmetic.* But this fact pivots on what *we* think—namely, on how we understand what is at issue with "arithmetic."

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on the face of it, somewhere between inadequate and nonexistent. It is (just barely) conceivable that sense could be made of a locution like "The Wazonga believe that morality requires them to act *X*-wise [i.e., to engage in child-sacrifice, or in some other practice that we ourselves deem morally outrageous]." But the story needed to make sense of this would have to be complex and (to our ears) extremely implausible. (For example, we might imagine that the Wazonga believe that this practice affords the only way to prevent some evil demon from wreaking havoc on the community.) Of course, the basis of such a story must be a principle which (like saving the community from anguish, agony, and annihilation) envisions a patently moral purpose from our point of view and would thus (in the circumstances) serve as a moral motive for us as well.

This example underscores my earlier point that there is a fundamental difference between morality and mores, a difference which relativism simply ignores in its tendency to identify the two. Relativism proclaims: "Other societies have *their* moral convictions (rules, standards, values) and we have *ours.* One is every bit as good as the other. To each his own. Nobody is in a position to criticize or condemn the moral views of others." But to take this line in moral matters would, in fact, be to abandon the very idea of morality. To be sure, mere custom is something else again. Variability does indeed obtain with respect to mere *mores:* we eat with cutlery, they eat with chopsticks; we sleep on beds, they sleep in hammocks; we speak one language, they speak another—each with equal propriety. However, this indifference does *not* hold for *morals,* for matters of moral principle, where universality does and must obtain. It is nonsense to say: "We treat the handicapped humanely; they drown them at sea to spare themselves the inconvenience of special accommodation. It's all just a matter of local custom." This sort of thing is just not viable from the moral standpoint! If crass selfishness, pointless maltreatment, wanton deceit, or the infliction of needless pain is wrong for us—as indeed it is—then it is wrong for them too; and conversely. This is the fundamental insight that endows morality with its emphasis on an absolutist universality which has it that, at the level of fundamentals, matters of moral principle are the same universally and for everyone.

So here stands the characteristic, and ultimately right-minded, insight of Kantian ethics: that when it is indeed *morals* rather than *mores* that are in view, then the issue has to be seen as one that is universal and absolute—that in this domain of morality proper, what is appropriate for one must be so for all. At the level of deeper principles, there is indeed a strict equality before the moral law.

V. The Hierarchy of Principles

Philosophers and social scientists who advocate moral relativism often fall prey to the oversimplification of seeing moral norms at all levels as

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being of a piece. They fail to see the distinction between established mores, which indeed are variable and context-dependent, and higher-level values and principles, which, I contend, are fixed, universal, and unchanging. Recognition of the hierarchical stratification of moral norms is essential to a proper understanding of morality. The fact that there are uniform and unchanging principles at the top of the hierarchy—principles that inhere in the very conception of morality itself—is quite compatible with plurality, variation, and even some measure of conventionality in the moral norms of the lower levels. The multilevel structure of moral norms provides the key to reconciling the inherent absolutism of morality with the "cultural relativity" of moral codes by showing how the relativistic variation of such codes is perfectly compatible with the absolutism of moral fundamentals. Plurality and variability in regard to lower-level norms is in no way at odds with an absolutist uniformity of higher-level principles.

It is, in the end, the controlling role of higher-level principles inherent in the very idea of what "morality" is all about that saves morality from a destructive fission that extends an open invitation to indifferentism. These higher-level moral principles ground such fixed and absolute moral values as: the value of the human person, grounding (inter alia) his or her rights to safety and security; the dignity and respect of the individual; liberty, individual freedom, and the right to self-determination; and people's rights to consultation in matters affecting their well-being and interests. We cannot at one and the same time remain within the moral purview and avoid acknowledging these fundamental desiderata as pivotal to the moral enterprise, seeing that they are *constitutive* of this enterprise as such. To abandon them is not to contemplate "a different morality," but to abandon the moral domain itself, to change the subject of discussion (e.g., to mores and customs). And when these rights are infringed or abrogated in a certain culture or society, that culture or society proclaims its moral failings in virtue of this very fact. There is simply no room for negotiation here. Different cultures may have different *mores,* but they do not—cannot—have different morals at the level of basic principles.

The uniformity of the higher-level norms determinative of morality means that different families of (appropriate) moral rules—different moral codes—simply represent diverse routes to the same ultimate destination. Moreover, given the functional integrity of morality—as an endeavor geared to safeguarding and promoting the best or real interests of rational agents as such—this is exactly how it should be. The mere fact that a single enterprise—*morality*—is at issue means that, despite the plurality of moral codes, we have to deal with a single uniform family of fundamentals; it means that the variability of moral rules is underpinned by an absolute uniformity of moral principles, the plurality of valid moral codes notwithstanding.

All moral codes have important elements in common simply in view of the fact that *morality* is at issue. As such, all moral codes are bound to encompass such morally fundamental considerations as the following:

- What people do matters. Some actions are right, others wrong; some are acceptable and some are not. There is an important difference here.
- This is not just a matter of convention, custom, and the way things are done. Violations of moral principles are not just offenses against sensibility but against people's just claims in matters where people's actual well-being is at stake.
- In violating moral rules, we inflict injury on the lives, welfare, or otherwise legitimate interests of others—either actually or by way of putting them at unjustified risk.

Attunement to considerations of this sort is, *by definition,* essential to any system of morality, and serves to provide the basis for such imperatives as "Do not simply ignore other people's rights and claims in your own deliberations!"; "Do not inflict needless pain on people!"; "Honor the legitimate interests of others!"; "Do not take what rightfully belongs to others without their appropriately secured consent!"; "Do not wantonly break promises!"; and "Do not cause someone anguish simply for your own amusement!" In the context of *morality,* principles and rules of this sort are universal and absolute. They are of the very essence of morality; in abandoning them, we would withdraw from a discussion of *morality* and would, in effect, be changing the subject. What we would say might be interesting, and even true, but it would deal with another topic.

From the moral point of view, the *empirical* search for "cultural invariants," as pursued by some ethnologists, is thus entirely beside the point.[10] When such investigators embark on a cross-cultural quest for "moral universals" or "universal values" amid the variation of social customs, they are engaged in a search which, however interesting and instructive in its own way, has nothing whatever to do with the sort of normative universality at issue with morality as such. Moral universality is not a matter of cross-cultural commonality but of a *conceptually* constrained uniformity. (It would be just as pointless to investigate whether another culture's forks have tines.)

How can this fixity of the conception of morality and of the fundamental principles that are at issue within it—inherent in the monolithic uniformity of "what *morality* is"—be reconciled with the plain fact of a diversity of (presumably cogent) answers to the question: "What is it moral to do?" How can such an absolutism of morality's fundamentals coexist with the patent relativity of moral evaluations across different times and cultures?

[10] See, e.g., Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture and Behavior* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1962); Kluckhohn, "Ethical Relativity; Sic et Non," *The Journal of Philosophy* 52 (1955): 663–77; R. Redfield, "The Universally Human and the Culturally Variable," *The Journal of General Education* 10 (1967): 150–60; Ralph Linton, "Universal Ethical Principles: An Anthropological View," in R. N. Anshen, ed., *Moral Principles in Action* (New York: Harper, 1952); and Linton, "The Problem of Universal Values," in R. F. Spencer, ed., *Method and Perspective in Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954).

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The answer lies in the fact that several intermediate levels or strata inevitably separate the overarching aims and principles of morality from any concrete judgments about what it is moral to do. We have, in fact, to deal with a descending hierarchy of the form indicated in table 1.

At the topmost level (level 1), we have the defining aims of morality, the objectives that identify the moral enterprise as such. At this level, we are instructed to act with a view to safeguarding the valid interests of others and to avoid harming them. These defining aims of morality explicate what is at issue when it is with *morality* (rather than, say, basket-

TABLE 1. *Illustrations from the Implementation Hierarchy of Morality*

Level 1: *Defining Aims of Morality*
- To support the best interests of people.
- To avoid injuring other people.

Level 2: *Fundamental Principles (Controlling Values)*
- Do not cause people needless pain (*gentleness*).
- Do not endanger people's lives or their well-being unnecessarily (*care for safety*).
- Honor your genuine commitments to people; in dealing with people, give them their just due (*probity*).
- Help others when you reasonably can (*generosity*).
- Do not take improper advantage of others (*fairness*).
- Treat others with respect.
- Do not violate the duly established rights and claims of others.
- Do not unjustly deprive others of life, liberty, or the opportunity for self-development.
- Do not deliberately aid and abet others in wrongdoing.

Level 3: *Governing Rules*
- Do not kill.
- Do not lie.
- Do not cheat.
- Do not steal.

Level 4: *Operating Directives*
- Killing in self-defense, in war, or when executing a legal judgment is justifiable.
- Be candid when replying to appropriate questions, but lying to save another's life is permissible.
- Do not play with unfair dice or defraud others in trade.
- Stealing when one's family is starving is allowable.

Level 5: *Concrete Rulings*
- Jones, return the money you borrowed from Smith.
- Mr. CEO, do not pollute this river; dispose of your sewage elsewhere.
- Mrs. Smith, do not let these children play with those matches.

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weaving) that we propose to concern ourselves. In spelling out the purpose of morality, what it is all about, these top-level norms provide the ultimate reference points of moral deliberation. Moreover, they are unalterably fixed; they are inherent in the very nature of the subject.

These aims also fix the fundamental principles and controlling values (level 2) that delineate the moral virtues (fairness, generosity, probity, and the rest). Such values define the salient norms that link the abstract defining aims of morality to an operational morality of specific governing rules. The norms embodied in level 2 are universal and absolute, serving as parts of what makes morality the thing it is. Accordingly, these level-2 principles also lie fixedly in the very nature of the subject.

At the two topmost levels, then, there is simply no room for any disagreement about morality. Here disagreement betokens misunderstanding: if one does not recognize the fundamental aims, principles, and values that characterize the moral enterprise as such, then one is simply talking about something else altogether. In any discussion of *morality,* these things are simply givens provided by the very terms of reference at issue. However, this situation changes as one moves further down the levels and takes additional steps toward concreteness.

At level 3, we encounter the governing rules and regulations that direct the specifically moral transaction of affairs. Here we have generalities of the usual sort: "Do not lie"; "Do not cheat"; "Do not steal"; etc. At this level, we come to the imperatives that guide our deliberations and decisions. Like the Ten Commandments, they set out the controlling rules of the moral practices of a community, providing us with general guidance in moral conduct. Here variability begins to set in, for these rules implement morality's ruling principles at the concrete level of recommended practices in a way that admits of adjustment to the changeable circumstances of local conditions.

A generalized governing rule proceeds on the order of the injunction "Do not steal" (i.e., "Do not take something that properly belongs to another"). This is, in itself, still something abstract and schematic. It still requires the concrete fleshing out of substantive implementing specifications to tell us what sorts of things make for proper ownership. Thus, the next level, level 4, presents us with the ground rules of procedure or operating directives that furnish our working guidelines and criteria for the moral resolution of various types of cases. (For example: "Killing in self-defense, in war, or when executing a legal judgment is justifiable.") At this level of operating directives, the variability of local practice comes to the fore, so that there is further room for diversification here; we ourselves implement the level-3 rule "Do not lie" by way of the level-4 directive "Be candid when replying to appropriate questions," but a society of convinced skeptics could not do so.

The operating directives of level 4 incorporate the situation-relative standards and criteria though which the more abstract, level-3 rules get their grip on concrete situations. Those general rules themselves are

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too abstract—too loose or vague—to be applicable without further directions to give them a purchase on concrete situations. They must be given concrete implementation with reference to local, and thus variable, arrangements.[11]

Finally, at the lowest level (level 5), we come to concrete rulings, individual resolutions with respect to the specific issues arising in particular cases. (For example: "It was wicked of Lady Macbeth to incite her husband to kill the king.")

In the implementation hierarchy laid out in table 1, we thus descend from what is abstractly and fixedly universal to what is concrete and variable. The principles of level 2 can be viewed as direct implications of the aims of level 1, but as we move downward past level 3 to the operating directives of level 4, there is, increasingly, a looseness or "slack" that makes room for the specific and variable ways in which different groups implement the particular higher-level objectives at issue.

As we have seen, the entire hierarchy begins with the ruling imperative: "Support the best interests of people." This overarching purpose does not itself stand subordinate to anything else. It is the defining aim of the enterprise that gives unity and determinativeness to the justificatory venture. The process of validating lower-level considerations in terms of higher-level ones must come to a stop somewhere.

Overall, then, we have to deal with a chain of subordination-linkages that connect a concrete moral judgment—a particular moral act-recommendation or command (at level 5)—with the ultimate defining aim of the moral enterprise (level 1). We confront a hierarchy of imperatives that place different injunctions at different levels of fundamentality in the moral enterprise, with some (the defining aims and fundamental principles) absolute and others (the concrete rulings) variable and relative to context and circumstance. Concrete moral rulings must derive their validity through being appropriate instantiations of an overarching principle of universal (unrestricted) validity.

To be sure, there is a "slack" that leaves room for increasing variability and dissensus, especially at the hierarchy's two lowest levels. Operating directives and concrete rulings will vary with situations and circumstances. We cannot expect to encounter any universal consensus across cultural and temporal divides: moralists of different eras (like physicians) are bound to differ, and the same is true of different cultures. There is, inevitably, substantial variability among particular groups, each with its own ideas influenced by locally prevailing conditions and circumstances.

[11] The analogy of natural law is helpful: "Theft, murder, adultery and all injuries are forbidden by the laws of nature; but which is to be called theft, what murder, what adultery, what injury in a citizen, this is not to be determined by the natural but by the civil law . . ." (Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, chap. IV, sec. 16). St. Thomas Aquinas holds that appropriate human law must be subordinate to the natural law by way of "particular determination"—with different human laws, varying from place to place, nevertheless representing appropriate concretizations of the same underlying principle of natural law. See *Summa Theologica*, IaIIae, questions 95–96.

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Nonetheless, the impact of lower-level variation is mitigated by the fact that justification at lower levels proceeds throughout with reference to higher levels where uniformity prevails.

At the level of aims and fundamental principles, then, morality is absolute; its strictures at this level hold good for everyone, for all rational agents. Lower-level rules, directives, and rulings must—if valid—preserve a "linkage of subordination" to those highest-level abstractions. The validity of concrete rulings is always a matter of their attuning global (and abstract) prescriptions to local (and concrete) conditions. Without that linkage to the fixed, highest-level absolutes (levels 1 and 2), the linkage to morality itself is severed. For a concrete ruling to be a proper moral ruling at all, there must be a suitable moral *rationale* for the action—a pathway of subordination that connects it in a continuous manner all the way up to the defining aims of the moral enterprise. Varying practices and codes of procedure only possess moral validity insofar as they are implementations of a fixed and determinate set of moral principles. Moral validity must always be rooted in a moral universality that is constrained by a *conceptual* fixity.

VI. The Claims of Our Own Community

How does the moral code of any society secure its obligating hold on me? Why is it that I should see myself as duty-bound to follow the established rules of my community rather than some other rules?

The answer is straightforward. A certain (potentially variable) rule obtains its binding grip (its deontic hold, as it were) upon me precisely through representing the contextually appropriate way of implementing a fixed moral principle or value in the particular social context in which I find myself. Local morality is a matter of substantially limited implementation of universal principles, and its bearing upon ourselves is rooted in the fact that it is our particular circumstance and situation that is at issue.

The salient point is that the moral code of our own community is, through this very fact, the one that is paramount *for us.* This moral code is the one that defines and specifies the rights and expectations of those others with whom we are (*ex hypothesi*) co-situated in a context of mutual interaction. After all, in morality, as elsewhere, the universal is available to us only through mediation of the specific: one can only pursue a generalized desideratum via its particularized (and variable) concretizations. Communication is universal, language is specific; eating is universal, cuisine is local; morality is universal, particular concrete moral codes are variable and diversified. Nonetheless, such variability does not undermine or abrogate validity. The universals of morality not only permit but *require* adjustment to local conditions, and at the local level we are concerned not with the validation of morality as such, but with the justification of a particular moral code for a particular group in particular

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circumstances. The concrete moral code of our community is the only way in which implementation of the higher-level demands of morality is available *to us*, given the realities of the particular context in which we live and labor.

To be sure, the behavioral practices of a society (ours included) are not above criticism. Anything that people do can be done badly—the shaping of a moral code included. Confronted by any set of purported "moral rules of behavior," we can and should ask: How well do these rules implement the fundamental principles that articulate the aims of the moral enterprise as we do (and must) understand it? Any system, for example, that authorizes the infliction of pain on people for no better reason than affording amusement to others deserves flat-out condemnation and rejection. It would be a decisive objection to any system of "morality" that it deems acceptable (let alone worthy of approbation) a mode of behavior which is immoral on the conscientious application of our standards—for example, a system that approves pointless lying, or wanton cruelty, or any other practice that undermines the legitimate interests of people.

Accordingly, the moral code of one's own community can be subjected to moral criticism and reevaluation. The question can always be pressed whether the concrete moral practices and rules of one's own community do indeed implement effectively the definitive values of the moral enterprise and, above all, whether these practices and rules satisfactorily serve the best interests of people in general. The concrete moral code of our community can be found defective or deficient in point of morality. (Think of Nazi Germany, for example.) Socially accepted principles of action are clearly not beyond criticism. However, this criticism can, if appropriate, only be developed from the vantage point of those aims and fundamental principles that characterize the moral project as such.

Of course, no belief system, no framework of thought, no system of norms—moral or otherwise—is an absolute, detached from the world and delivered to mankind in unchangeable perfection by the world-spirit from on high. We can do no more than utilize the local, particularized, diversified instruments we humans can manage to develop within the limitations of our place and time. Thus far, what moral relativists say makes sense. But this emphatically does *not* engender an indifferentist subjectivism, for pluralism does not mean that there are no applicable standards, that with morality one can throw things together any which way. As I have argued, an overarching purpose is operative in the very conception of what morality is all about, and this prevents morality from becoming unraveled as a rational enterprise through the pluralism and variability that relativists mistakenly see as somehow destructive of moral universality.

Moreover, the existence of differences over the recognition of the fundamental facts at issue is not relativism but merely a perfectly rational situational *contextualism.* People must feed themselves and house them-

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selves. Nature dictates no single, unique process for accomplishing such ends: we must make the best use we can of the possibilities that place and time put at our disposal. The same holds true with respect to morality's requirements of due care for the interests of people. Here, too, one must simply do the best one can, striving within the conditions and circumstances of one's setting to establish practices and rules that align human interactions in a productive harmony from which everyone can benefit.

VII. Conclusion

What, then, of moral objectivity? Let us go back to basics. What is it that makes something objective? The objectivity of an issue lies in its being a matter of fact that, in principle, can be determined to be so by anyone, because what is at issue is not a matter of opinion or of custom but rather obtains impersonally, independently of what individual people may think or prefer. Objective matters do no lie in the eyes of the beholder but pivot on the actual facts. This being so, consider the salient question that arises in regard to morality:

> Would the prevalence of such-and-such a way of behaving among the members of the community at large effectively conduce to people's best interests in making their lives more secure, more pleasant, and/or more rewarding and satisfying?

The matter at issue here is not a matter of what I like or what would please me; it is not my attitude or my reaction or my own personal interests that are at issue—or indeed yours or anybody's. The question is inherently general, relating to the reaction of people at large, and it relates not to what they want but rather to what makes them better off by way of being conducive to their well-being. The question concerns the condition of people in general, not on the basis of what you or I or some group or other do think about this, but on the basis of what people should, and sensible people would, think. Specifically, it is a question of what makes someone better off in terms of their real or true interest—what conduces to their health and well-being, their security and safety, their opportunities for self-development and self-expression. All these issues, and others like them, are substantially matters of objective fact.

Accordingly, what renders morality objective is the fact that moral evaluations can—and should—be validated as cogent through consideration of how the practices being evaluated advance the aims of the enterprise for whose sake morality is instantiated in human affairs. Morality as such consists in the pursuit, through variable and context-relative means, of invariant and objectively implementable ends that are rooted in a commitment to the best interests of people in general. To claim that someone ought (or ought not) to act in a certain way is thereby to commit oneself to the availability of a *good reason* why one should or should not

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do so—and a reason that is not only good but good in a certain mode, the moral mode, in showing that this sort of action is bound up with due care for the interests of others. Whether an action exhibits due care for the interests of others is something open to general view, something that can be investigated by other people as readily as by the agent himself. Since people's (real or true) interests are rooted in their needs, the morally crucial circumstance that certain modes of action are conducive (and others harmful) to the best interests of people is something that can be investigated and sensibly assessed by the standards generally prevalent in rational discussion. These matters are not questions of feeling or taste, but represent something objective about which one can deliberate and argue in a sensible way on the basis of reasons whose cogency is, or should be, accessible to anyone. The modes of behavior of people that render life in their communities "nasty, brutish, and short" (or even merely more difficult and less pleasant than need be) generally admit of straightforward and unproblematic discernment.

The fact that thievery, vandalism, boorishness, arrogance, and rudeness are ethically inappropriate is not rooted in some individual's or group's dislike of such things, but rather in the (perfectly objective) fact that such modes of behavior will, as they become more prevalent, increasingly degrade the quality of life of the community by creating circumstances in which the pursuit by individuals of their life-plans and objectives becomes increasingly difficult.

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